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Dr. John Mendelsohn, 82, Researcher Who Led Top Cancer Center, Dies

By Katie Thomas

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Dr. John Mendelsohn, who led the prestigious University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center through an era of substantial growth, and who, as a scientist, helped pioneer a new type of cancer therapy, died on Jan. 7 at his home in Houston. He was 82.

His death was confirmed by MD Anderson, which said the cause was glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer.

Dr. Mendelsohn was the cancer center's third president, serving from 1996 to 2011, a period in which MD Anderson rose in prominence to be considered the nation's top cancer hospital. At the same time, its annual revenues quadrupled, to \$3.1 billion.

"He was an extraordinary scientist, he was a compassionate individual, he was a strategic thinker, and he was able to bring all of those capabilities to bear as an exceptional leader of MD Anderson," Dr. Peter Pisters, the center's president, said in a telephone interview.

Dr. Mendelsohn began his career as a researcher. He made his name in the 1980s at the University of California, San Diego, where he developed cetuximab, the first so-called targeted cancer therapy, which blocks receptors on cancer cells to halt their growth. The drug was approved by the federal government in 2004 and is sold by Eli Lilly as Erbitux, for the treatment of colorectal, head and neck cancers.

Erbitux and other targeted therapies were seen as breakthroughs for cancer patients because, unlike older chemotherapy drugs, which typically kill all rapidly dividing cells, targeted treatments go after the proteins that help cancer cells grow and survive.

John Mendelsohn was born in Cincinnati on Aug. 31, 1936, the son of Joe and Sarah (Feibel) Mendelsohn. After graduating from Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, he studied at Harvard, earning his undergraduate degree in biochemical sciences in 1958.

He married Anne Charles, a research chemist at Polaroid, in 1962.

After a year in Scotland as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Glasgow, Dr. Mendelsohn attended Harvard Medical School, earning his degree in 1963. Residency training at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston followed, as did fellowships at the National Institutes of Health and at

Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

In 1970, Dr. Mendelsohn joined the U.C. San Diego School of Medicine, where, in addition to helping to develop Erbitux, he became the founding director of the institution's cancer center.

He left San Diego in 1985 to become chairman of the department of medicine at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and spent more than a decade there until he took the job as president of MD Anderson in 1996.

Dr. Pisters said that when Dr. Mendelsohn arrived in Houston, MD Anderson did not have the physical size or reputation it has today. But, he added, "It did have what he could see as remarkable potential."



Dr. Mendelsohn, right, with former President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush at an event celebrating both their June birthdays in 1999 at the MD Anderson Cancer Center. Also pictured is Robert A. Mosbacher, a secretary of commerce in the Bush administration. Mr. Bush was a strong backer of the cancer center.
MD Anderson Cancer Center

Dr. Mendelsohn's career was not without controversy. In 2002, he was criticized as having failed to identify problems as a board member at two troubled companies, the energy giant Enron and the biotech company ImClone Systems.

In the case of Enron, Dr. Mendelsohn served on the board's audit committee despite having little financial experience; the company, which filed for bankruptcy in 2001, was later found to have used a series of questionable accounting practices to make it seem more profitable than it was.

The ImClone scandal involved allegations of insider trading after the company's stock plummeted in the wake of news in late 2001 that its lead drug, Erbitux, the drug Dr. Mendelsohn had developed, had not yet been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. The company's founder, Samuel D. Waksal, was arrested on charges of insider trading after prosecutors said he told friends and family to sell their stock. (The lifestyle maven Martha Stewart was famously ensnared in that scandal.)

Dr. Mendelsohn was not accused of wrongdoing in either case. But he came under scrutiny at ImClone in particular because he held dual roles as a member of the company's board and as a paid scientific consultant. Lilly acquired ImClone in 2008.

Dr. Mendelsohn's role in the development of Erbitux also came into question in 2002, after The Washington Post reported that patients in a clinical trial of Erbitux at MD Anderson had not been informed that, as head of the cancer center, Dr. Mendelsohn held a financial stake in the drug's success. The hospital changed its policies to ensure that patients were told of such conflicts.

Dr. Mendelsohn survived the scandals, bolstered in part by the support of powerful Houston figures like former President George H. W. Bush, who was an enthusiastic backer of MD Anderson.

Indeed, Dr. Mendelsohn's ability to befriend all types of people, from patients and fellow researchers to the leaders of Houston society, helped elevate MD Anderson's profile. His wife, Anne C. Mendelsohn — who became an educator and a producer of science documentary films — was a key partner, joining him in his social and philanthropic work.

"They raised billions of dollars together," said Jeffrey Mendelsohn, the middle of the Mendelsohns' three sons. "As their lives evolved and my father got more and more prominent positions, she dedicated more and more of her life to working with him."

During Dr. Mendelsohn's last five years as president, MD Anderson was recognized as the top cancer center in the country by U.S. News & World Report, surpassing Memorial Sloan Kettering.

In a telephone interview, Dr. Mendelsohn's sons — the two others are Andrew and Eric — credited his success to a ravenous curiosity that did not stop at the boundaries of science or medicine. He was an enthusiastic traveler, they said, and loved good meals, opera and all kinds of books.

Andrew Mendelsohn, his eldest son, recalled that when he went to college, his father would quiz him on the courses he was taking. The next time he returned home, "there would be six books on the subject, full of underlines," he said.

"He was always trying to distill the essence of a book or a person or a moment," he added.

Besides his wife and sons, Dr. Mendelsohn is survived by eight grandchildren.